



Promoting the Passion: Teachers as Writers, Teachers as Collaborators

by Mary Warner

Introduction

What is your perception of yourself as a writer? How do you see yourself in relation to teaching writing? Do you enjoy writing? These questions are critical for us as teachers of writing. If we are passionate about a topic, a book, or any area of learning, we can more easily engage our students. This chapter precedes the pedagogical chapters directed toward student writers because we cannot teach well what we don't know or what we find intimidating. Furthermore, our perceptions of ourselves as writers and teachers of writing and our attitudes about teaching writing affect how we approach this often daunting task in this era of assessment. Above all, no teacher should feel alone and unsupported, particularly when class sizes increase, the paper load becomes overwhelming, and the numerous publics we serve ask why writing is not improving.

Consider the following scenarios and what they indicate about the range of situations we find ourselves in regarding the teaching of writing.

Scenario 1

The [North Carolina] Writing Test is coming up soon, so my students are preparing. It is really hard to teach someone how to write. I can do workshops, conferences, practice, and editing all day long, but these kids don't even know how to get started. I find myself making sentences up with them, and even hoping that they are quick enough to write down exactly what I'm saying rather than nothing at all. I hope that at least I'm demonstrating

the thinking process for them, and it will pay off in the end. There's no time for grammar, and I just wish I could tell if I was actually teaching them how to interpret reading. It isn't something I've successfully learned how to gauge.

These words come from a then initially licensed teacher in her second year of teaching middle school language arts. In her undergraduate preparation for a BSEd in English Education, April had a course in the Teaching of Writing as well as coursework in creative writing. She clearly enjoys writing. As her academic supervisor when she student taught, I observed the many creative activities she used to engage her students. Her email identifies several key issues for writing teachers: facing state-mandated writing tests and feeling compelled to “teach to the test”; the difficulty of “teaching” anyone to write; students’ preparedness and motivation or lack of motivation for writing; how to integrate grammar; and the relationship between thinking and writing—even how to teach thinking. Above all, in a more personal note not included in the previous excerpt, she expressed the loneliness that is all too common among new teachers—she wants advice and the opportunity to dialogue about the many complex challenges in teaching writing; she wants support from seasoned teachers; she wants to know that she is not alone—but she isn’t sure to whom she can go for advice or guidance or with whom she can dialogue.

Because it’s been five years since I began drafting this chapter and it’s gone through several revisions, I recently contacted April again to share what I had written. Her response to this chapter shows her growth as a teacher of writing; it also identifies some essential issues for all teachers of writing:

I read over my quote . . . and amazingly enough, I still, for the most part, feel that way about writing. It is still extremely challenging to take students who have no concept of organization, style, voice, and what makes sense in a sentence and turn them into great writers, or even mediocre ones. It is even more challenging to get a student who doesn't care about writing and sees no value in it to practice the grammar skills necessary to be able to write sentences with logical and sensible structure. . . . I [now] have a stronger appreciation of the practice of modeling writing for my students, and am more aware of how I verbally address a student's particular weaknesses in writing. By participating in the writing process with my students, just as I was doing 7 years ago, I can show my enthusiasm. I can show how fun and creative that all types of writing can be, even essays. I have been able to plant that seed of passion, excitement and opportunity into a large fraction of my students, so that they want to take their own ideas and run with them.

Once they have that desire, they are much more willing to do the editing and revisions because they want their work to be the best it can be. Then there is a trickle down effect because they want to share their work with everyone else, and once others see that a child their own age is producing great work, sometimes it inspires them to want it a little more. . . . With students who are struggling, I have found that words of encouragement along with re-teaching are always more effective than the dreaded red marks covering the paper they've been working on for an hour. Taking the time to let them know that even though they can improve, they've got great ideas; this lets them know the problem isn't impossible to solve.

And making the time to build individual relationships with all of the students is by far the most important thing I do as a teacher because whether it comes to writing or just making it through the day . . . they will move mountains to make you proud of them . . . most

of my students want to see that tear that falls down my face when I hear them share a piece of writing. . . . That's something they love to work towards, and is something that even the weakest of writers can do.

Scenario 2

The following quotes come from a veteran high school teacher whom I “met” when she emailed asking for teaching ideas for a ninth grade English course using the novel *Forgotten Fire* by Adam Bagdasarian. During an online search, Sylvia had found my syllabus for Children’s Literature where I taught the novel. I willingly shared a number of ideas with her. She responded with the following: “*What a kind, considerate, helpful note! As I sit here wiping away the tears of frustration after a day and a half of in-service on assessment in standards-based education, I needed that collegial assistance!*” In a follow-up email, I commiserated with her about “assessment in standards-based education” and professional development sessions like these that sap our passion for teaching instead of energizing us. What is more debilitating in trying to motivate students to write and to see the intrinsic value of writing than tying it solely to assessment?

A tangential comment—when I take an inventory of reading interests in my university courses, Literature for Young Adults or Children’s Literature or The Bible as Literature, my students often talk about “losing interest in reading” once they reach middle or high school, even though they loved reading when they were younger. An even less frequent occurrence is when they comment on any writing they do or have done, particularly writing that they do outside of required coursework. They seem to have little sense that writing could be an activity as fulfilling as reading. Furthermore, as various data show the decline in reading among adolescents, there is even more of a decline in writing or seeing any interest in writing for anything beyond school assignments. Sylvia’s frustrations about the emphasis on assessment-based education demonstrate another obstacle to fostering any passion for writing—when students and teachers face the barrage of assessment, there is even less possibility for any enjoyment from or desire to do writing.

Once I’d faxed Sylvia a helpful author’s interview, from my edition of *Forgotten Fire*, I received this response:

I got your fax before leaving last night—what a bright spot in a depressing day! If you do presentations to teachers, I will wager that you avoid the pitfall of using a degrading tone and message: “You are DOWN here and need to come UP here to the vision (meaning her vision since we haven’t invested in its urgency) with me.” That lack of recognition of the validity of where we are and the clear picture of the rationale for moving elsewhere strands me on an island of frustration. I want to do what’s best for the learning environment and the students and I want to be in compliance with my employer. I wish they’d practice what they preach.

The particularly poignant phrases in this email are “the lack of recognition of the validity of where we are” and Sylvia’s feelings of being “strand[ed] on an island of frustration.” Her words substantiate a central aim of this chapter: to explore ways that teachers of English/teachers of writing on all levels can validate each other through collegiality. Such collegiality might be an antidote to the “UP here/DOWN there” dichotomy so easily created in the standards-based educational environment. Additionally, when teachers are trapped into the

contexts of “on-demand” writing and writing “to the test,” the possibility of making writing appealing or of tapping student interest decreases exponentially.

Sylvia’s specific reference to presenters—particularly university instructors working with public school teachers or administrators delivering in-service—avoiding the use of degrading tones and messages creates another direct link to the focus of this chapter. In my positions in English Education at three different universities, I’ve had a number of opportunities for collaboration with public school teachers: being a participant in the Dakota Writing Project (DWP) Summer Institute in 1995 and in the San Jose Area Writing Project (SJAWP) Summer Institute in 2006; directing a summer course for teachers grades 7 to college called A Dialogue About Reading, Writing and Thinking; being a member of the 10th Grade Writing Assessment Committee in North Carolina; facilitating the Advanced Institute: Writing Your Best Practice with middle and high school teachers; team-teaching English Methods courses with high school teachers; and coordinating writing partnerships between my students (pre-service teachers) in a college course on teaching composition to middle and high school students.

These opportunities and ongoing experiences with the California Writing Project (CWP), the San Jose Area Writing Project (SJAWP), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have shown me again and again what collaboration can do for teacher morale and how the collaborative community of writers model creates the most successful professional development. These positive experiences of professional development are the antithesis of those Sylvia experienced. These collaborations make clear that no one level—university, secondary, middle, or elementary—has teachers who are “better than” teachers on another level or have more authority or knowledge. The key is tapping into the expertise on any level and sharing what applies to learners on other levels. The power of teachers teaching teachers—a foundational National Writing Project (NWP) philosophy—and the community of writers that is established in Writing Project institutes are primary ways to pass on the passion for writing.

Scenario 3

In another context, at a meeting of supervisors for the student teachers in our English Credential Program, several supervisors who are retired high school English teachers commented that our student teachers really need help in how to teach writing. The co-editor of this book, Jonathan, and I simply nodded our empathy and awareness of the void. We had only recently (first offered in Fall 2006) created a course, Writing and the Young Writer, addressing that need; to this point, however, we had not had a teaching of writing course. Ironically, the retired high school English teachers probably had never “officially” been taught to teach writing either, but they had learned to integrate writing as they progressed through their careers. Courses in the teaching of writing in teacher preparation programs are also a fairly recent addition. The current “era of assessment,” however, demands that teachers deliver explicit writing instruction that surpasses merely integrating writing assignments within literature courses. Few teachers have been prepared for such instruction.

Scenario 4

Paula Stacey, developmental editor of books in K–12 education and long-time English teacher, in her September 2011 article “Let’s Stop Teaching Writing,” describes watching and participating in the evolving writing curriculum since her first teaching job 30 years ago. She notes that students, in the name of writing instruction, are being asked to jump through

an “ever-expanding and increasingly byzantine set of hoops,” but less and less are actually being asked to write. In reflecting on her own education Stacey realizes that the writing she was asked to do, [mostly] “. . . explaining my thinking about the subjects I was studying, created an authentic engagement with ideas and content that was blissfully uncomplicated by format and process or half-baked notions about writing for a made-up audience.” Stacey’s “modest proposal” then suggests that we ask students questions, read their answers, and ask more questions; these exchanges allow for real thinking and real writing.

The teachers and prospective teachers of the previous scenarios and the issues described are representative of the multiple reasons for developing a passion for writing as well as indicative of why the passion for writing has waned. Our understanding of the many challenges related to teaching writing and our desire to collaborate as peers and partners in the struggle are central purposes of this book. The book may be most beneficial for those teachers of English, whether they are pre-service or in-service, who have never had a course in teaching of writing. These teachers are at an even greater disadvantage in the era of assessment because they face the expectations of “producing” passing scores on the various state writing tests, while not having the preparation. They may well like to write, as is true of many English majors who go on to be teachers of English, and been successful writers themselves; as we all know though, being able to do something yourself is far different from being able to teach others to do it.

Where, then, do teachers in any one or more of the scenarios described find the engagement with writing that provides the impetus for lifelong writing, for “beyond the test writing,” for going beyond formulaic writing? How do they find the desire to write themselves and thus to impart the appeal and passion for writing to their students? Building on my own journey and experiences with those who fostered and continue to support my writing—since I, too, am a teacher of writing who never had a formal course in the teaching of writing—this chapter identifies several ways to develop and promote a passion for writing.

- You as Writer; You as Teacher of Writing
- “Hang Together”
- “Writing Your Best Practice”
- Find a Mentor/Be a Mentor
- Collaborate/Be a Collaborator—Form Partnerships
- Search Out Professional Communities That Challenge and Support

You as Writer; You as Teacher of Writing

Patricia Belanoff and Peter Elbow’s book, *A Community of Writers* (1999), contains an Inventory for Writers that includes questions about how often students write and whether they enjoy writing. Three questions in the “Attitudes Toward Writing” segment are especially pertinent regarding motivation:

1. Do you enjoy writing?
2. In general, do you trust yourself as a person who can find good words and ideas and perceptions?
3. Do you think of yourself as a writer?

For many years as I taught composition courses, I asked my students to fill out the inventory. Recently, I've wondered how I would fill out this survey, realizing I should have done what I asked my students to do. Writing is not easy for me; the collection of "rejections" for journal articles I've submitted and the editors' calls for revision of chapters and books are daunting. All too often I've experienced some of the sentiments expressed by Liesel Meminger in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2005). Liesel has been given a notebook and is told by the mayor's wife, from whom Liesel has been stealing books, that she should write. Liesel reflects "but there would be punishment and pain, and there would be happiness, too. That was writing" (524–525). Liesel also comments "words are so heavy" and in the final line of the novel sums up her feelings about writing: "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right" (528). I, too, have hated and loved the words. Yet in planning this book and particularly in writing this chapter, I'm revising my perspectives about writing, about why the passion for the language I hold for reading and literature should be no different than the passion for writing.

Consider taking stock of the writing you do in a week. Such an inventory of you as a writer can lend a new appreciation to what we ask of our students. If some of the writing you do is onerous and prosaic, consider how your students might find some of the writing you require. If you note how pressured you are to meet deadlines for some of the writing tasks, remember the time pressures of your students. In reviewing the writing I have done, I quickly identified a wide range. Even in the age of emails, I still love writing letters, birthday cards, and cards for special events, seasons, and days. In my teaching position, I'm constantly writing to students and for students—responses to their written work, letters of recommendation, and emails answering a variety of concerns, as well as creating writing prompts, essay topics, and exams. As a supervisor of student teachers, I write observation reports, formative and summative evaluations, and even more letters of recommendation. As a university professor, I write grants, statements of purpose to accompany tenure and promotion requests, proposals for conference presentations, journal articles, reviews, books, and more tedious items such as the English Program Approval document for the State Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

Once you have your inventory, consider the following questions: How many of these writing events are enjoyable? Which are pleasurable? What is the appeal of writing? Or maybe better questions are: How is it that we are able to do all these kinds of writing? What are we learning as we write? In what ways are we "not alone" because we write? Reading provides rich contact with language and the written word that feeds the writer's soul. Experiencing the wonder and pleasure of good writing certainly motivates me and can motivate our students. Any self-reflection on why we write must take into account the richness of what has been written and the terrible poverty we'd experience in so many contexts without the written word. Lily, the 14-year-old protagonist of Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2003), constantly writes to make sense of the harsh world of prejudice and abandonment that threatens to destroy her. Our students, and we as teachers of writing, can have a passion for writing if we write and surround ourselves with living examples of writing that leads us to a deeper sense of humanity.

A creation of J. K. Rowling, "the pensieve," which first appears in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), presents the perfect image for how writing can aid the complex and frequently harried lives that our students (and their teachers) live. Dumbledore, in his typical wisdom, explains to Harry, "I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind" (597). He demonstrates

as he “siphons the excess thoughts from [his] mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at [his] leisure” (597) that the pensieve is a repository for these excess thoughts. Once the excess thoughts are in the pensieve, “it becomes easier to spot patterns and links” (597). The essential gift of writing is its power as a pensieve, for getting our thoughts on paper (or “on screen” as is more likely in our technological world) and giving us space to examine and make sense of our thoughts and, consequently, of our lives. Could there be any greater appeal for writing than to find and make meaning?

“Hang Together”

In *A Wind in the Door* by Madeleine L’Engle (1973), Meg Murry is in conversation with the high school principal, Mr. Jenkins. At this point in the novel, Meg’s youngest brother, Charles Wallace, is critically ill and needs to be in harmony with the universe in order to survive. Meg reminds Mr. Jenkins: “Remember, Mr. Jenkins, you’re great on Benjamin Franklin’s saying, ‘We must all hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately.’ That’s how it is with human beings and mitochondria and farandolae and our planet, too, . . . We have to live together in—in harmony, or we can’t live at all” (147). Franklin’s admonition, quoted by Mr. Jenkins and Meg, is pessimistic, yet realistic. English teachers on all levels from elementary through post-secondary need to “hang together” in the face of standards-based education and mandated state writing tests; they need to collaborate on curriculum that scaffolds the writing process; and they need to avoid the “blame game” attitudes of “Why don’t these students know (fill in the blank)?” or “Why weren’t they taught (fill in the blank)?”

My first experiences with high stakes writing tests—one of the most insidious causes of the “blame game”—were in North Carolina. I began teaching at Western Carolina University about the same time as the NC Standard Course of Study established World Literature, non-British and non-American, as the subject matter for 10th grade and the State Department of Public Instruction required a 10th grade writing assessment. Almost immediately, since I was teaching Fundamentals of Teaching Composition, I needed to become familiar with that 10th grade writing assessment and the field of World Literature. Additionally, for the pre-service teachers in my course who were going to teach in elementary and middle schools, the State required writing assessments in fourth and seventh grades—a major stretch since my own teaching and subsequent work in English Education had been primarily in high school. My route to acquiring knowledge of the content and specifics of these various assessments took several paths—all of which included networking.

I listened to and learned from the cooperating/host teachers with whom I had student teachers, traveling throughout western North Carolina to meet with English teachers at their schools, on “their turf.” All too often university faculty expect the teachers to come to “us”; instead, in a concerted effort to be collaborative and more credible, I went to their school settings. Unknowingly, I was operating on one of the assumptions of the NWP expressed by Jim Gray, the founder of the Bay Area, California, and National Writing Projects:

Universities and schools can work together as partners in a cooperative effort to solve the writing problems common to both levels. New collegial and nonhierarchical relationships among professors, instructors, and teachers are essential; the top-down tradition of past

university/school programs is no longer useful as a staff development model. (Gray qtd. in Olson, 1997, xi)

The high school teachers I met with, these practitioners, knew the “real world of teaching English” and were making their way in the new frontier of assessment demands. As they shared their concerns about giving “their” students over to student teachers who didn’t have the experience, I realized the importance of working with these veteran teachers to know the mandates and state curriculum.

To assure I grasped the issues related to End-of-Course (EOC) and End-of-Grade (EOG) tests, I responded when invited by K–12 Language Arts consultants and personnel from the NC State Department of Public Instruction to be on the 10th Grade Writing Assessment Committee. After I became a Certified Trainer, I attended the training sessions to help the pre-service 10th grade teachers go into the field with as much expertise as possible and to try to assuage some of the cooperating teachers’ anxiety about “turning over” their students to novice teachers.

A part of “hanging together” is linking with state language arts consultants—to learn the “rules” of the game and possibly to find ways to infuse passion into writing to the tests, or better, to teach “writing to learn”—the kind of writing that moves out of formulaic boundaries. Even more fundamentally, networking with language arts consultants or curriculum specialists opens channels of dialogue—those in state and district offices need practicing teachers to test and challenge the designs and standards; practicing teachers likewise need to voice concerns and provide input. Neither group can afford to antagonize the other or be adversarial. Given the budget constraints for education, those in State Departments of Public Instruction are more likely to have funding or better access to funds than individual teachers, schools, or districts.

In *A Dialogue About Reading, Writing, and Thinking*, a summer institute I designed for teachers in North Carolina, the major premise was to foster dialogue among middle and high school teachers, university English faculty, and professionals from the business world about partnerships in literacy. The impetus for this institute came from hearing—all too often—my university colleagues bemoan the lack of writing skills of first year college writers; high school teachers talk about what seemed not to have been taught to their students in middle grades; and people in professional writing contexts and numerous politicians berate the lack of writing skills they see. The primary text for the institute was Regie Routman’s *Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading, Writing, and Other Teaching Dilemmas* (1996). In her introduction Routman explains she never saw herself as a political person, but the current educational climate calls her, and all teachers of English language arts, to a new responsibility.

But we can no longer keep our doors closed and be passive. We can no longer be naïve or silent. We must speak out because our silence speaks volumes. Today, the political climate is against us in many places. Make no mistake. There is a backlash in education that demands our attention. We need to get smart, vocal, and politically savvy, and we need to do it now. (xvi)

Building from Routman’s commentary on the effects of the backlash, particularly directed at reading and writing, the participants in the institute began with explaining their teaching contexts. My university English department colleagues really had little knowledge about English language arts taught in middle and high schools and were quite unaware of the pressures of high stakes testing. More specifically, without knowledge of the effects of assessment-driven

teaching on the teaching of writing in middle and high schools, my university colleagues hadn't understood why so many first year university students retain the formulaic writing patterns and lack integration of the conventions of writing. Some of the high school English teachers participating did not know what was being taught in the middle grades. The institute allowed for a sharing of expectations and realities; professional business people explained the kind of writing demanded in the workplace. Professional writers—some graduates of the university where the institute was held—talked about the importance of writing in obtaining jobs. From the knowledge shared, participants designed writing strategies to use in their teaching contexts, but fundamentally, the institute fostered an understanding of the complexity of teaching writing.

“Writing Your Best Practice”

Nearly a year after I first began drafting this chapter, I created an Advanced Institute for middle and high school teacher-consultants of the SJAWP called Writing Your Best Practice. Teacher-consultants are the “graduates” of the Writing Project’s five-week Invitational Summer Institute (ISI); having had an extended time of partnering to demonstrate their best teaching ideas, they learn from each other about the teaching of writing and doing their own writing. They are some of the best examples of teachers “hanging together.”

When I got what seemed like “an inspiration” for the Writing Your Best Practice institute, I had no idea of what it could become. I was “stuck,” facing writer’s block as I anticipated writing this book. Admittedly my English Education position at a large university demands more hours than I have and seriously limits time for research and writing, but even more, I’ve come to realize, I cannot write this book alone. I’m not “right there, right now” in middle and high school English classrooms; the realities I knew in my years of teaching middle and high school English have changed; I *need* these teacher-consultants, these reflective practitioners who are totally dedicated to becoming better writers and helping their students become better writers. And the process of collaborating with this core group of middle and high school teachers actually replicates the best of the writing process. Each time we met, we continued to build a community of teachers who were writing and learning.

The words of the TCs who participated speak for themselves about what these teachers have experienced and continue to experience through writing communities like the Advanced Institute. In response to evaluation questions about what worked in the July 2007 Institute, middle school teacher Carla Dunavan commented

- time to discuss our best practices with a diverse group of teachers (diverse meaning from different schools, grade levels, classroom clientele, etc.)
- focus questions that got us thinking about the day’s task, chapter to work on, etc.
- time to talk and time to write—communication (people came when they could and were kept up to date via email/scribe notes, etc., when they couldn’t attend)
- being with a group of compassionate and passionate teachers who clearly loved what they were doing

Amy Thompson, another middle school teacher, commented, “I can’t say enough about the group. I love being part of a club where the people are intelligent, well read, want what’s best for kids, are open to improving their craft. It’s been great.”

During the 2008 Institute days, we were able to polish chapters and continue the process. Again, the evaluative commentary expresses the essence of this chapter—of how teachers can develop and sustain a passion for writing. Kathy González and Maria Clinton, high school English teachers, clearly articulate the strongest values of collaboration. Kathy González likens the work we did together to the goals of National Board Certification in that we reflect on our practice and continually improve it. Kathy also highlighted, as so many of the other participants did, the “fabulous by-product of gleaning new ideas from colleagues.”

Maria Clinton shared “. . . the hours I spent there were like an oasis of calm amid the sea of activity and stress that is my life right now . . . I got to hear some great writing from my colleagues, I ‘harvested’ more good teaching ideas for next year, and it motivated me to keep writing.” Maria also identified how the writing and revising we do in the Advanced Institute mirrors the writing process we do with our students: “Doing that writing and sharing it with my colleagues reminded me again about how risky writing can be for our students, but also how fulfilling it can be when one is surrounded by supportive peers.”

Additionally Maria articulates how the Writing Project’s approach to professional development can really bring “heart” to the teaching of writing:

Their attitude is so different from many staff developers who come to our schools. . . . Many professional staff developers have the attitude of possessing the “secret of success” for students, which makes the rest of us feel really stupid for having taught all these years without figuring it out. Writing Project consultants, on the other hand, just share what works for them, and they invariably do it with great humility and humor. They are open and eager to hear adaptations we might make to their ideas, and they are the first to tell you that they “harvested” their ideas from other sources. . . . I can picture Writing Project consultants in their classrooms with their students, and I wish I could be there to learn from them.

Note in each participant’s comments the recurring themes of validation, collaboration, the development of a writing community, the importance of time and an immediate goal for writing, the practice of the writing process, and insight into our students’ writing process. Lindsey Stewart, a middle school language arts teacher, participated in the Advanced Institute for the first time in June 2008; as a “newcomer” to the Institute, her response is most “telling”:

For me this was an amazing time of meeting with other teachers around the Bay Area and discussing different writing strategies we use in the classroom. I had the opportunity to discuss topics and strategies that will be included in the book . . . to read over a couple chapters of the book and critique/edit the piece. In doing so, I not only offered suggestions, but I also jotted down useful ideas/teaching strategies that I plan to incorporate into my own classroom! It’s amazing how much I can learn in just one day when I’m networking with other talented teachers.

Find a Mentor/Be a Mentor

My first post-doctoral teaching position in English Education brought me in contact with a wonderful mentor, Stewart Bellman, at Black Hills State University. Stewart had taught Methods of Teaching English and Composition for the English Teacher—courses I was teaching for the first time. He directed me to *Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a*

Process (1997), a publication created by the California Writing Project (CWP), which for the first time in my then 20 years of teaching gave me the theory for my practice, for what I had intuited, and helped me realize why some of my methodology hadn't succeeded. Carol Booth Olson, University of California Irvine, later divided the book into two volumes: one devoted to elementary and middle grades and another for high school and college. These became my primary texts at my next institution where the Teaching of Composition course called for me to guide K–college teachers of writing.

Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a Process introduces the philosophy and purposes of the National Writing Project (NWP)—an organization that truly mentors teachers of writing. The NWP is also the only federally funded writing program, with continuous funding provided for over 25 years. While the NWP and its various state sites are not the only possibilities for teachers of writing, they are the most established and best organized. Grasping NWP's philosophy and purposes may be one of the best ways to become a mentor.

First, writing is a process, a recursive process that requires far more than a single “shot” for any writing assignment. I can never fault my students who don't really think about revising writing because I remember how seldom I did any more than a single draft of papers in high school or undergraduate work. Maybe I had some natural ability as a writer simply because I've always been a reader and “absorbed” language, but this relatively obvious concept about writing as a process with all that entails was quite revolutionary for me. Clearly revising is about more than simply “correcting” or copying text over; it's “re-vision” or seeing anew or thinking anew. And passionate writers know the importance of reflecting on or thinking about ways to communicate more precisely. The “era of assessment” with so many calls for on-demand writing further militates against a sense of writing as process; yet if we are to teach writing in a context of lifelong learning, the central premise of writing as recursive is essential.

Carol Booth Olson explains that part of the California Writing Project's (CWP) and subsequently the NWP's philosophy about writing is the understanding that “there [has been] a shift in emphasis from learning to read and write, to reading and writing to learn and to our emerging sense that literacy is not the possession of minimal competency or basic skills but the development of a richer, deeper, and more integrated base of understanding and knowledge” (*Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a Process*, vii). Teachers of writing need to understand this shift in emphasis and implement it in their “writing” lives before they can guide student writers in comprehending such a crucial emphasis.

In *Shadowlands*, Lewis is meeting individually with one of his students. As the student, a young man who has been an enigma for Lewis, is explaining why “he reads,” he quotes his own father who said, “We read to know we're not alone” (Fleischer, 115). The essence of integrating reading and writing to help our students and us as writers and teachers of writing suggests we both read and write “to know we are not alone.” We do these important acts to be more fully human. Especially in my first semesters of teaching teachers to teach writing, I needed to understand this shift in emphasis; now I see the reading and writing to learn as one of the most powerful appeals of language.

A second focus of the Writing Project is on thinking about learning and helping our students to know “*how* to solve problems and make their own meaning from what they learn” (Olson, vii). This focus may also have been intuitively obvious to me; however, without a mentor to guide me to a work like *Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a Process*, the work that framed the emphases and substantiated what I was practicing,



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I would not be the teacher I am. Ironically, another 10 years or more have passed since my first contact with the ideas and philosophy of teaching writing compiled in *Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a Process*, and only now in courses like Children's Literature and Literature for Young Adults have I implemented a strategy that I realize focuses on students "[making] meaning from what they learn."

Students in my Children's Literature course were writing literary analysis essays in response to five core novels, and were struggling to move beyond summary to analysis and even to formulate a claim to prove. After they submitted the first two or three papers and I tried to provide feedback that would bring some clarity to their writing, I gave the students the opportunity to do an in-class essay where they could explain what they'd intended to do in their essays. This "essay on their essays," a type of metacognition, provided the students with an opportunity to articulate what they understood they were writing and what they had learned about writing literary analysis. This example demonstrates another piece of wisdom I learned from Stewart and his Writing Project background: the importance of reflection on your pedagogy—in a sense, being a lifelong learner in how to teach.

In the intervening years since these "aha" moments on the significance of conceiving of writing as a process and of integrating reading, writing, and thinking, standards-based education—with its insistence on measurable outcomes—has caused a kind of regression, particularly for those new to teaching and who have not been introduced to the richness of writing as a process. Textbook companies, eager to provide the ultimate solution to raising test scores, market lock-step materials designed so that any teacher who simply follows each direction can successfully teach writing, at least the kind of writing that is "on-demand" and completed in a single sitting. Administrators driven to have student test scores high enough to earn merit pay and to avoid the stigma of being "program improvement schools" dictate the strategies and the professional development so teachers have little say, thereby frequently lacking any validation for their own expertise.

The prescriptive teaching materials can aid novice teachers and give beginning writers a basic structure; however, they often lack a sense of "life." The formulaic processes frequently isolate rather than integrate, and what is not integrated in this case is the

creative, imaginative, playful sense of language and the act of writing—the passion. In such constrained settings is it likely that teachers or students “are having fun yet?” When writing is linked only to product and products that have to be measurable—and measurable in predictable ways—fun or enjoyment is unlikely; student interest, motivation, or desire to write is even less likely. And teachers of writing who are mandated to use whatever will bring results are stifled by these restrictive methodologies.

Stewart had been a director of the Dakota Writing Project and readily modeled the Writing Project philosophy of “teachers helping teachers.” He tapped the talents of middle and high school teachers who had honed their expertise in writing instruction and quickly convinced me of the importance of enlisting Writing Project TCs to help pre-service teachers prepare to teach writing. Since my own teaching of writing in middle and high school was, at that time, about 10 years in the past, and my methods had not integrated writing as a process, it was crucial to identify in-service English teachers who were the best consultants, those who were entirely credible because they were refining their practices and had student samples to demonstrate what worked for various writing projects and in different learning contexts. Once I’d “shared” my classroom with teacher practitioners, learning along with my pre-service teachers, I knew I could never go back nor did I want to go back to “solo teaching,” especially if I wanted to provide the best learning context for future teachers.

Stewart also modeled the importance of “cross-teaching levels” collaboration. First on the university level, he coordinated a tri-state grant for Faculty Development in such topics as cooperative learning, critical thinking, and response to student writing. On the middle through high school teaching level, he taught me about the writing groups, which are a component of the Writing Project Summer Institutes. From the idea of these writing response groups, I developed writing partnerships between my pre-service teachers and the students of the middle or high schools they would teach. The partnerships served many purposes, not the least of which was giving the pre-service teachers, now years “removed” from the writing of their future students, direct contact with what and how seventh or ninth grade students, for example, wrote.

In one unforgettable partnership, the pre-service teacher found that her seventh grade partner could correct the grammar she was using in papers for college courses, which she, the “teacher-to-be,” hadn’t understood. And the writing her seventh grade partner shared with her wasn’t “beneath her”—he was writing a novel! These writing partnerships also created opportunities for pre-service teachers to practice the “language of response” and to see the challenges of describing writing assignments for students. In the journal accounts my students wrote, describing their writing partner sessions, they incorporated reflection on writing and learning—that all-important second focus for why we write.

Possibly the most important type of “cross teaching levels” that Stewart taught me about was the level of learning with and from your students. In Chapter 13 of *Winning Ways of Coaching Writing: A Practical Guide for Teaching Writing Grades 7–12*, edited by Mary Warner (2001), he describes several strategies for writing with your students, specifically trying to write in the style and voice of students—your middle and high school students, for example. The cliché of “walking a mile in another’s shoes” takes on a whole new meaning when we try to “write in another’s [shoes] voice.” Stewart died in November of 2003 from a brain tumor; fortunately, many of his wise and time-tested teaching strategies are recorded in *Winning Ways of Coaching Writing*; he is a seminal example of a mentor, teacher, and lifelong learner who promoted the passion for writing.

As I've learned through the emails with Sylvia, from countless former students who are now teachers, and through online resources created by NCTE and various Writing Projects, opportunities to be mentors and to be mentored abound. If you have questions or concerns about writing, or if your passion is waning, try locating a mentor or consider becoming a mentor. Maria Clinton, cited earlier in this chapter, shared her perspective on being a mentor during the Writing Your Best Practice Institute: "Every time I supervise a student teacher or mentor a new teacher, I steal not only their teaching ideas, but also their enthusiasm and fresh, positive attitudes. They [beginning teachers] tend to inspire me and keep me from getting complacent or cynical."

Collaborate/Be a Collaborator—Form Partnerships

As shown from the previous examples, opportunities abound for you as a teacher of writing to collaborate and find support. In addition to the numerous possibilities connected with the NWP, NCTE also provides innumerable resources and contexts for collaboration. One specific professional development aspect of NCTE is CoLEARN: "Research-Based Professional Development Resources from the Experts."

Whatever your position in English language arts, you do not need to struggle alone. If you're a university instructor, connect your pre-service students with "real world" writing situations and students through writing partnerships; team-teach methods courses with middle and high school teachers of writing; meet with them to find out the realities of their teaching worlds; be cognizant of the writing assessments and state tests.

If you're an in-service teacher, connect with universities in your area and inform English preparation programs about what you want to see in your new colleagues, what you need to help you survive the "era of assessment," and how you can do more than just "teach to the test"; participate in local, state, and national English teacher associations like the NWP and NCTE; share your successful teaching strategies; support your newer colleagues—take a student teacher; try doing collegial journals; participate in a study or inquiry group; start a book club—read about writing and the best pedagogies; and be proactive about the professional development in your school or district.

If you are a pre-service teacher, ask your professors about NWP, NCTE, and the necessary resources to support you in the challenges of teaching writing, particularly in the current climate of assessment; seek out "real world" writing experiences; partner with teachers in grade levels where you will teach; and read, write, and develop the habit of being a lifelong learner.

Search Out Professional Communities That Challenge and Support

Building from the notions of "hanging together," being partners in literacy, and participating in collaborative opportunities like the Advanced Institute, a concrete way to sustain a passion for writing is to participate in workshops and professional development. The extensive presence of the NWP, with writing projects in every state in the nation—many

states have several writing projects, most often connected with state universities—provides powerful and sustaining professional development. Writing projects host invitational summer institutes, bringing together teachers who have developed successful writing practices. These teachers share their pedagogies and theories, participate in writing response groups, and strengthen themselves as writers. The “graduates” of invitational summer institutes become the teacher-consultants offering writing project sponsored in-service and professional development throughout the school year.

If you are feeling the “assault” of teaching writing “to the test,” of struggling to motivate student writers, of simply not knowing how to teach writing, locate a writing project near you. Go to the NWP online: <http://www.nwp.org/>. Once you explore what the NWP has to offer, ask your administrators, curriculum specialists, or professional development personnel to provide the kind of in-service the NWP espouses and is committed to. Some of the tenets describing effective professional development include

- ongoing and systematic programs that make it possible for teachers to come together regularly throughout their careers to evaluate the best practices of other teachers
- programs to improve student writing [involving] teachers at all grade levels and in all content areas
- programs that use writing as a means of discovery and a way of learning (Jim Gray, cited in Olson, xi)

In the time I’ve been a co-director of the SJAWP, I’ve had opportunities to hear so many teacher-consultants “testify” about the transforming and renewing experiences of invitational summer institutes and of ongoing professional development that is life-giving rather than energy-draining. I have been amazed at teachers’ desire and initiative to seek out the kind of intellectual and professional communities created by writing projects. One example is TC Pamela Cheng of the SJAWP, who has co-directed the Invitational Summer Institute and initiated the SJAWP’s Young Writers Camp. She moved from New York, where she had experienced a rich and supportive context in her language arts teacher preparation. When Pam moved to the Bay Area, she actively sought out a professional intellectual community here before she had even obtained a teaching position. And though her initial experience was with a group geared much more to university level teaching, she was led to the SJAWP. After being a participant in the ISI, Pam became the co-director of the summer institute. A highly effective and creative elementary teacher, she is a model of the lifelong learner and practitioner the writing project supports and fosters. Pam currently holds a district-level position, enabling her to encourage many more ELA teachers to infuse their writing instruction with passion.

Consider again the key points of this chapter from the perspective of some reflective question:

- When you reflect on yourself as a writer and as a teacher of writing, what reading is feeding your writing soul? What are you and your students writing that is leading you to a deeper sense of humanity?
- In what ways have you been able to support a colleague or someone teaching in middle school if you’re a high school teacher or vice versa? Have you had an opportunity to “hang together” so as not to “hang separately”?

- Would you consider writing and sharing your best practice? How might articulating your rationale for writing practices help you find value in what you do?
- Is there someone who is a mentor for you in the teaching of writing? Are you that mentor for colleagues? Could you become a mentor?
- When have you had opportunities to collaborate? Have you considered partnering with peers across grade levels?
- What professional communities might you join?

As Dumbledore explained to Harry, we do indeed “have too many thoughts and memories crammed into [our] minds.” Use the essential gift of writing in its power as pensieve to give you, and by consequence your students, the space to examine and make sense of your thoughts and lives.

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